

N-1577-FF

# **SOVIET THREATS TO INTERVENE IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1956-1973**

**Francis Fukuyama**

SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM  
**THE FORD FOUNDATION**

A SERIES IN INTERNATIONAL  
SECURITY AND ARMS CONTROL

JUNE 1980



Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>JUN 1980</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1980 to 00-00-1980</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East 1956-1973</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Rand Corporation,1776 Main Street,PO Box 2138,Santa Monica,CA,90407-2138</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>53</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

This publication was supported by Grant No.  
790-0061 from the Ford Foundation.

The Rand Publication Series: The Report is the principal publication documenting and transmitting Rand's major research findings and final research results. The Rand Note reports other outputs of sponsored research for general distribution. Publications of The Rand Corporation do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the sponsors of Rand research.

Published by The Rand Corporation

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**Rand**  
SANTA MONICA, CA. 90406

PREFACE

In late 1978, The Ford Foundation provided grants to The Rand Corporation and several university centers for research and training in international security and arms control. At Rand, the grant is supporting a diverse program. In the Rand Graduate Institute, which offers a doctorate in policy analysis, the grant is contributing to student fellowships for dissertation preparation, curriculum development, workshops and tutorials, and a series of visiting lecturers. In Rand's National Security Research Division, the Ford-sponsored projects are designed to extend beyond the immediate needs of government sponsors of research by investigating long-term or emerging problems and by developing and assessing new research methodologies. The grant also is being used to fund the publication of relevant sponsored research that would otherwise not be disseminated to the general public.

All research products are being made available to as wide an audience as possible through publication as unclassified Rand Reports or Notes, or in journals. The Rand documents may be obtained directly or may be found in the more than 330 libraries in the United States and 35 other countries which maintain collections of Rand publications.

This note grew out of a doctoral dissertation written at Harvard under the direction of Professor Nadav Safran. The original idea for this topic, and much of its development, are owed to him. The overall hypothesis was conceived shortly after the October War. Since that time, and particularly following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

in December 1979, the center of attention has shifted from the Arab-Israeli theater to the Persian Gulf. It should be noted that whatever other changes have occurred in Soviet Middle East policy in that period (and there have been several), nothing that has happened up through the present (mid-1980) in any way contradicts this note's central thesis concerning Soviet unwillingness to confront American power directly in the Middle East, least of all the Afghan intervention. This is not to say that such a change will not occur in the future--or has already occurred in the thinking of Soviet leaders and is only awaiting an opportunity to be made manifest.

SUMMARY

The Soviet Union has threatened to intervene in a Middle East conflict on six occasions: during the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1957 Syrian Turkish crisis, the Lebanon crisis of 1958, the June 1967 War, the 1970 War of Attrition, and the October 1973 War. These six cases exhibit a strikingly consistent pattern: In each case the Soviets delayed their intervention threats until the peak of the crisis had passed, i.e., until a resolution of the conflict was already in sight and it was fairly clear that the threat would not have to be carried out. The primary factor governing the timing of Soviet threats has invariably been the U.S. response and the likelihood of escalation to direct superpower conflict. Moreover, the threats the Russians issued were frequently characterized by extremely imprecise language which implied an intent to intervene, while avoiding a binding or explicit commitment to do so. Soviet threats to intervene, therefore, appear to have been bluffs, and Moscow has not been willing to seriously challenge the position of the United States in the Middle East up through the October War. This cautiousness has hurt the Soviet position substantially and was the major cause of Egypt's defection from the Soviet camp between 1972 and 1974.

The reason for Moscow's caution in the Middle East appears to be that Soviet leaders have continued to regard the American stake in the region as more important than their own. This remained true between 1956 and 1973, despite the shift in the global balance of power that occurred in this period. This reading of American interests and intentions must be continually reinforced, however, through long-term

commitments and short-term demonstrations of will. Furthermore, overwhelming Soviet military preponderance in areas like the Persian Gulf may create such an inviting military opportunity as to nullify the importance of the U.S. commitment in Soviet thinking.



CONTENTS

PREFACE .....	iii
SUMMARY .....	v
Section	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. SIX THREATS TO INTERVENE .....	4
III. THE REASONS FOR SOVIET CAUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST .....	25
IV. SOVIET INTERVENTION THREATS OUTSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST.....	29
V. PAST AND FUTURE .....	39
Footnotes .....	42

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the postwar era, the Soviet Union and the United States have had to carry out their world-wide competition for influence under the constant shadow of the possibility of nuclear war. This has led to contradictory policy pressures. On the one hand, each of the superpowers has at times been tempted to use military force either to protect existing positions or interests, or else to expand its influence at the expense of the other. There is little evidence of any diminution of this drive, at least on the Soviet side, over time. On the other hand, the possibility that conflict in a local theater might escalate into a larger and more destructive global war has induced a great deal of self-restraint on the part of both superpowers. Not only have cold war conflicts like Korea and Vietnam been carefully limited in scope, but Moscow and Washington have generally been unwilling to push potential confrontations to an actual test of strength. Each has imposed limitations on its own adventurism, not at the point where it met actual military resistance to its actions, but rather at a point a good deal prior to the moment at which it believed it would meet such resistance on the basis of its readings of the signals of intent being given off by the other side. In the shadow-boxing that has characterized the crises of the nuclear age, threats of intervention rather than intervention itself have been the primary means of establishing the outer bounds of potential conflict.

This has been particularly true of a theater like the Middle East, which has been subject to endemic conflict and political fluidity. In Central Europe, Soviet and American spheres of influence were established rather quickly after World War II, and the underlying currents

of social change did not act to disrupt them seriously. The borders in Europe have been so firmly established that an invasion across any of them would be a highly salient political act that would almost certainly provoke an armed response. In the Middle East, by contrast, the Soviet and American spheres of influence have changed frequently due to domestic upheaval and external invasion. Armed conflict has been such a common phenomenon that neither superpower has been willing to honor commitments with the automaticity that exists elsewhere. Instead, commitment has been established on an ad hoc basis crisis-by-crisis, through an elaborate process of politico-military signalling, i.e., through threats to intervene. Avoidance of direct conflict between the superpowers depends on their ability to accurately read each other's signals of intent, and to exercise a degree of self-restraint that would avoid putting those intentions to an actual test of arms.

But while intervention threats have been a necessary fact of life for superpower diplomacy in the Middle East, they have also been a source of opportunity to be exploited. Precisely because there is such a great reluctance to push conflicts to a military showdown, the temptation exists to bluff opponents out of courses of action that they might otherwise have followed. This has been especially true of the Soviet Union, since it has until recently occupied the weaker position politically and militarily after its first entry into the region in 1955. The possible disjunction between word and deed means that we cannot take Soviet threats to intervene at face value, but must subject them to interpretation to uncover the real intention behind them. This intention, in turn, can tell us a great deal of a political nature about the magnitude of risk the Soviets are willing to run in pursuit of par-

ticular foreign policy goals, and about the sorts of considerations that govern their crisis behavior.

While U.S. policymakers have had to evaluate Soviet intervention threats on a case-by-case basis, there is by now a fairly substantial empirical data base which can be subjected to a comparative analysis. The Soviet Union has threatened to intervene directly with its own combat forces in a major Middle Eastern crisis involving the United States on six occasions: during the 1956 Suez crisis, the Syrian-Turkish crisis of 1957, the Lebanese crisis of 1958, the 1967 June War, the War of Attrition in 1970, and the October 1973 war. What we find when we put these cases side by side is a strikingly consistent pattern of behavior. In each instance, the Soviets delayed their intervention threats until the peak of the crisis had passed, i.e., until a resolution of the conflict was already in sight and it was fairly clear that the threat would not have to be carried out. The primary factor governing the timing of Soviet intervention threats has invariably been the position of the United States. Moscow has been unwilling to act forcefully while it was still unclear about what the American position would be and while there was thus an appreciable risk of provoking a serious confrontation. It was only at the moment that the U.S. began to impose restrictions on its own behavior or that of its clients that Moscow would threaten to intervene, and even then, only in support of an outcome to which the United States had given its nominal agreement. Moreover, the threats the Russians have issued were frequently characterized by extremely imprecise language which implied a genuine intent to intervene, while avoiding an explicit or binding commitment to do so. Altogether, Soviet crisis behavior has attempted

to create the impression that Moscow was willing to give its clients strong military support, while in actuality avoiding any serious challenges to the U.S. position in the Middle East. Soviet threats to intervene, therefore, appear to have been bluffs. These conclusions were no less true in 1973 than they were in 1956, despite the intervening growth in Soviet strategic and power projection capabilities.

By not threatening to intervene sooner, the Soviets have frequently jeopardized the interests of their clients. The Arabs have been allowed to suffer large territorial, manpower, and economic losses at the hands of their opponents. This fact has not gone unnoticed, and indeed lay at the heart of Sadat's dramatic decision to leave the Soviet camp between 1972 and 1974.

The Soviets have threatened to intervene or have actually used combat forces in areas in or near the Middle East on several other occasions, such as in Yemen in 1967, Ethiopia in 1977-78, and most recently in Afghanistan at the end of 1979. These cases will be excluded from this study because American interests were not heavily involved on the other side. As we will see, it was the possibility of superpower confrontation in the particular context of the Middle East that produced the pattern of Soviet behavior outlined above.

There are other geographical theaters, however, in which the balance of political stakes and risks has been similar to those in the Middle East. The pattern of late threats was evident in the 1958 Taiwan Straits crisis, and in China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam. But a good deal of caution is necessary in applying these results too readily to other times and places: Soviet behavior is highly dependent on political context, which must be carefully evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

## II. SIX THREATS TO INTERVENE

Before proceeding to a systematic analysis of the six cases, it is necessary to establish a few brief definitions. By an "intervention threat," we mean any conditional promise to use Soviet combat forces at a future time, whether or not this is made explicitly or implicitly, verbally or through some physical action like a troop alert. Intervention threats may be categorized according to two separate criteria, their vividness or their precision. A threat can be vivid without being precise. For example, it can suggest that certain catastrophic consequences such as escalation or nuclear war might arise from noncompliance with the condition given in the threat, without stating that they will actually do so in so many words. When we speak of the "climactic threat" in each crisis, we mean either the most vivid or the most precise, or some combination of the two. While this in theory might seem to be an ambiguous definition, in practice it is almost always clear which threat the Soviets regard as the one they intend to be taken more seriously. Finally, by the "peak" of the crisis, we mean the moment of maximum uncertainty as to its ultimate resolution, from a Soviet perspective and with respect to Soviet interests.

In two of the six cases, Suez in 1956 and the June War in 1967, the Soviets restricted themselves to purely verbal threats. The climactic threats during the Suez crisis consisted of a series of letters on Nov. 5, 1956, from Bulganin and Shepilov to the leaders of Britain, France, Israel, and the United States, as well as to the president of the U.N. Security Council, and a TASS statement on Nov. 10 threatening to send volunteers to Egypt. The letters to Britain, France, and Israel were all extremely vivid but at the same time quite imprecise.

They demanded that each country obey the U.N. General Assembly ceasefire resolution, and suggested that if they did not, the conflict in the Middle East could "spread to other countries and turn into a third world war." Bulganin asked British Prime Minister Eden,

In what situation would Britain find herself if she were attacked by stronger states, possessing all types of modern destructive weapons? And such countries could, at the present time, refrain from sending naval or air forces to the shores of Britain and use other means--for instance, rocket weapons....

France was issued a similar threat and Israel's continued existence as a state was called into question. At the same time, the Soviet notes nowhere actually stated that these three countries would come under Russian attack unless they obeyed the ceasefire, only that they could. The Bulganin letter to Eisenhower and the Shepilov letter to the president of the U.N. Security Council were slightly different in style: both proposed highly specific military actions against the three invaders with conventional ground, air, and naval forces, and set very precise deadlines for compliance. But the two letters linked deployment of these forces to joint action with the United States, an obviously improbable condition. Finally, a TASS statement noted the fact that the tripartite invasion was causing great indignation among ordinary Soviet citizens, and indicated that the Soviet government would not hinder their departure to fight on the side of the Egyptians.

The climactic threat in the June War, by contrast, consisted of a single message from Premier Kosygin to President Johnson over the hot line, that was only moderately vivid but much more precise than

the November 5, 1956 letters. Kosygin spoke about the possibility of an "independent decision" by Moscow and the risk of a "grave catastrophe," and stated that unless Israel unconditionally halted operations within the next few hours, the Soviet Union would take "necessary actions, including military." Kosygin's threat was not hedged by a play on the would/could distinction, nor was Soviet intervention linked to multilateral action of any sort.

The climactic threat in both cases came well after the peak of the crisis. The Suez crisis began with an Israeli attack on Egypt on October 29, 1956, followed by an Anglo-French ultimatum on October 30 demanding that Egypt and Israel withdraw to a distance of 10 miles from the Suez Canal or else face occupation by forces from these countries. The peak of the crisis undoubtedly came with the expiration of the ultimatum on October 31, when it was clear that Britain and France were on the verge of intervention against Moscow's client. A Soviet intervention threat at that point might have deterred the two European powers from proceeding. Instead, the letters containing the threat of rocket attack did not arrive until November 5, by which point the British and French had already destroyed or scattered the Egyptian air force on the ground and occupied Port Said with paratroopers, while the Israelis had succeeded in occupying all of the Sinai up to the 10-mile limit and opened the Straits of Tiran. In the interim, the Soviets received several reassuring signals that the Anglo-Franco-Israeli invasion would cease of its own accord: The United States had stated its unconditional opposition to its allies' actions in numerous public statements and by its votes for U.N. ceasefire resolutions between October 31 and November 4; the Israelis had already unilaterally halted operations and accepted the U.N. ceasefire on the morning of the 5th; and



British Prime Minister Anthony Eden had demonstrated his weakening resolve by agreeing in principle to a ceasefire and police action by U.N. forces. The British and French decided to accept the armistice within twelve hours of the Soviet threats, and announced this publicly twenty-four hours afterwards. The threat to send "volunteers" to Egypt was not made publicly until November 10, four days after the ceasefire had finally taken hold.

The June War began with a preemptive Israeli air attack on the Egyptian air force on the morning of June 5, 1967. On the Egyptian front, the peak of the crisis came almost immediately after confirmation of the success of the opening strike reached Moscow, probably late on the 5th or early in the morning of the 6th. At that point, an Israeli victory was already predictable and the Soviets could have moved quickly to prevent them from occupying the Sinai and destroying the rest of the Egyptian army. But while the U.S. voted for a series of ceasefire resolutions in the Security Council on the first three days of the war, it took no active measures to restrain its ally and indeed tacitly agreed to a substantial "punishment" of Egypt. Nasser, moreover, failed to appreciate the seriousness of his situation and refused to accept a ceasefire until June 8th. The Soviets issued no climactic threat whatsoever with respect to Egypt. The Israelis occupied the Sinai up to the Suez Canal, systematically destroying the remainder of the Egyptian army, and ceased firing of their own accord. The Russians in effect permitted their client to suffer a humiliating defeat that led to the resignation on June 9 of their oldest and most influential ally in the Middle East.

On the Syrian front, the peak of the crisis came early in the morning of June 9, when Israeli forces crossed the Syrian border for

the first time in the war and made evident their intention of pushing the Syrians off the Golan Heights. Kosygin's climactic hot line threat was delivered more than thirty-five hours afterwards (on June 10), by which time the Israelis had broken the main line of Damascus's defenses on the Golan Heights. At the time that the threat reached Washington, the United States had already gone on record in support of a separate Security Council resolution mandating a ceasefire on the Syrian front, which had been accepted by both Israel and Syria. In contrast to the situation in Egypt, Washington had been actively pressuring Israel to cease firing for some twelve hours. Some observers have suggested that the Soviets began to fear that Tel Aviv would attempt to capture Damascus, and threatened to intervene for this reason. But in fact the Israelis had already achieved most of their objectives and were winding down operations at the moment that the Soviet threat arrived. Moreover, the moment of acute danger to the highly unstable Ba'thist regime did not arise only with the prospect of the physical occupation of Damascus, but considerably before. Prior to the war, the Soviets had feared that even a major Israeli retaliatory raid might cause it to collapse; a serious effort to protect the Syrians would have begun before the Israelis began their land invasion, and not afterwards. A firm ceasefire finally took hold just three hours after the Kosygin message was delivered.

In contrast to the first two cases, the Soviet threat during the 1970 War of Attrition was entirely military and not verbal. It consisted of the entry of Soviet-piloted MiG-21s into the airspace over the Canal Zone, where they could intercept Israeli aircraft on bombing runs. The Soviet Union had already staged a limited intervention with

SA-3 crews and MiG-21 pilots to protect targets in the interior of Egypt in March and April of 1970. What the MiG incursions seemed to signal was not the threat of intervention per se, but the possibility that the existing intervention would be extended to include all of Egypt up to the post-1967 armistice line along the Suez Canal. Were an integrated air defense network to be installed over the Canal Zone, it could provide cover for any Arab ground forces attempting to liberate the Sinai by crossing the canal. The Soviet action could be compared to a rather precise verbal threat, which stated that if the Israelis did not accept the ceasefire and become more forthcoming in subsequent negotiations, the Soviets would participate directly in the battle for the Canal Zone if and when it was renewed.

The War of Attrition grew out of, on the one hand, Egyptian attempts to dislodge the Israelis from the Sinai through prolonged artillery bombardments and commando raids and, on the other, Israeli efforts to restore the ceasefire and topple Nasser through the aerial bombardment of Egyptian forces in the Canal Zone and infrastructural targets in the interior of Egypt. The initial phase of the Soviet intervention took place in March and April 1970 and succeeded in deterring Israeli deep-penetration bombing of the interior. The peak of the crisis is difficult to pinpoint because the conflict was a rather drawn out affair, but it probably came in April or May of 1970 when the Israelis were being forced to desist from their bombing of the interior and the momentum had begun to swing in favor of the Egyptians. Soviet entry into the Canal Zone conflict at this point might have enabled Cairo to move up its missile wall to the Canal quickly and contemplate offensive operations in the Sinai. Instead, the War of Attrition

bogged down into a costly stalemate. Pressure for a settlement of the conflict mounted over the summer. On June 19 the United States proposed the so-called Rogers Initiative, which called for a ceasefire-in-place and negotiations toward a more comprehensive settlement under the auspices of Gunnar Jarring. Nasser visited Moscow at the end of the month and was told by the Russians not to expect a substantially increased military commitment. As a result, he announced his acceptance of the ceasefire on July 23. At the same time, the Israelis came under intense U.S. pressure to follow suit and by mid-July had announced their willingness in principle to accept the Rogers Initiative. The first engagement between a Soviet-piloted MiG-21 and the Israeli air force did not occur until July 25, i.e., at a point when a ceasefire was virtually in hand. A second incursion took place on July 30, the day before Israel officially announced its agreement to the Rogers Initiative. On this occasion, the Israelis set a trap for the Soviet pilots and shot down four or five MiG-21s. The Russians did not return to the Canal Zone in the week between July 30 and the date the ceasefire went into effect, August 7.

The remaining three cases involved some combination of verbal and military threats. The Syrian-Turkish crisis of 1957 and the Lebanese crisis of 1958 were similar in style and substance. Both cases involved the efforts of the United States, Turkey, and several other pro-Western Arab states to topple a newly established pro-Soviet Arab nationalist regime. In Syria, a Ba'thist-led coalition came to power within the framework of a quasi-parliamentary system over the summer of 1957. While not in fact Communist-dominated, this government undertook a number of anti-American measures in August which made U.S. policymakers

suspect that it was an outright Soviet satellite. In the 1958 crisis, U.S. Marines were landed in an already turbulent Lebanon in response to the violent overthrow of the Hashemite Monarchy by a group of officers led by Brigadier Abd al-Karim Kassem. In both cases, the Soviet threat consisted of an extended campaign of warnings and intimidation ostensibly designed to deter a counterrevolutionary attack on their client. The rhetorical content of these threats was similar to that of the November 5, 1956 letters sent during the Suez crisis, being at once highly vivid and very imprecise. In 1957, for example, Khrushchev told James Reston of the New York Times, "If war breaks out in the Middle East we are near Turkey and you (the U.S.) are not. When the guns begin firing, the rockets can begin flying." In 1958 he wrote to President Eisenhower that armed intervention against Iraq "may lead to highly dangerous and incalculable consequences; they may initiate a chain reaction which no one will be able to stop." In both cases, Soviet threats continually emphasized the possibility of escalation and global war involving the use of nuclear weapons. But they never stated that Moscow would initiate a nuclear (or even a more limited conventional) war in response to a Western attack on its clients. Indeed, the threats seemed to suggest that a larger conflict would arise only through miscalculations or inadvertence.

In addition to the verbal threats, the Soviets used their armed forces to signal the possibility of intervention as well. In 1957 and again in 1958, extensive troop maneuvers were held by the Soviet Union along its border with Turkey, commanded by a prominent Soviet general. In addition, the Syrian crisis saw the deployment of a Soviet cruiser to the Syrian port of Latakia, the only such use of Soviet naval forces in any of the six crises considered here.

The Syrian crisis peaked in the first week of September 1957, when U.S. special representative Loy Henderson returned from a fact-finding trip to the Middle East and announced, in effect, that the United States intended to apply the Eisenhower Doctrine against the pro-Soviet Ba'thist regime in Damascus. The U.S. was seriously intent on intervening and a Soviet threat to protect Syria would have been most useful at this point. In the second half of September, virtually all possibility of a Western intervention against Syria disappeared. This was because all the Arab members of the pro-Western coalition, including Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, had dropped out, leaving the U.S. alone in the ring with Turkey and Syria. With America's Arab allies now pledged to defend Syria, it became politically unthinkable to proceed with the anti-Syrian plan devised during the Henderson mission. While there was no U.N. ceasefire or other formal legal instrument to signal American acceptance of the status quo, President Eisenhower stated clearly on October 3 that the U.S. had no intention of taking action against Syria. It was not until October 7, however, that Khrushchev initiated the climactic series of warnings by granting an interview with Reston. The campaign of threats continued at a high level of intensity for the remainder of the month of October. Marshal Rokossovsky was appointed to head the Transcaucasian Military Command on October 23, and joint land and sea exercises were announced on the 24th. The threat was abruptly called off on October 29, for no apparent reason related to the Middle East.

The peak of the Lebanese crisis occurred on the two or three days following the republican coup d'etat against the Hashemite Monarchy in Iraq on July 14. U.S. Marines were landed in Lebanon on the 15th in

response to an urgent appeal for help by the Lebanese government, and there was widespread speculation that it would be extended to Iraq. But the climactic campaign of verbal threats did not begin until July 19, when Khrushchev dispatched urgent letters to leaders of the United States, Britain, France, and India proposing a great power conference on the Middle East. In the meantime, a number of reassuring signals had appeared indicating that no action against Iraq would occur. No loyalist opposition to the republican regime, upon which the success of a Western intervention would rest, had stepped forward. Moreover, amicable relations between the Western capitals and Baghdad were established quickly, so that the American and British foreign ministers were able to announce on July 18 that no intervention was planned.

There are slight anomalies in the timing of the threats in the Syrian and Lebanese cases which do not affect our overall conclusions. The cruiser Zhdanov was sent to Latakia on September 21, before the Russians could have been completely sure that the action planned during the Henderson mission had been called off. And the troop maneuvers in 1958 were held on July 17, again before the peak of the crisis had really passed.<sup>1a</sup> Neither of these "threats" was a terribly precise one and the Soviets risked little by issuing them when they did. As we will see below, the latter action was explained by Nasser's unexpected appearance in Moscow at the height of the crisis, which induced Khrushchev to offer him a small gesture of support which he understood to be meaningless as a commitment.

The final case is that of the October War, in which Soviet threats were once again both verbal and military. The climactic verbal threat took the form of a letter from Secretary Brezhnev to President Nixon,

which was not particularly vivid and a bit less precise than Kosygin's June 10, 1967 hot line message. Brezhnev stated that if the United States failed to cooperate in a joint intervention to force the Israelis to accept the ceasefire, "we should be forced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally." Brezhnev did not say explicitly that these unilateral steps would be military, as Kosygin did, nor did he actually promise to take them, but only to "consider the question." But it was a more precise threat than any of the Khrushchev-era warnings. The real innovation was the placing of all seven of Moscow's airborne divisions on alert, suggesting that they would be deployed to the Middle East. While these forces had been in existence ever since the mid-60s, their use in this fashion constituted an innovation in Soviet signalling. The Russians also took a number of measures that may or may not have been related to an intervention in Egypt, including the standing down of military transport aircraft and the transit through the Turkish straits of a cargo ship containing "nuclear material" bound for Alexandria.

The tendency has been to take the Soviet intervention threat during the October War seriously, both on the part of U.S. officials at the time (who staged the by now well-known nuclear alert in response), and by subsequent commentators. The reason for this may have been the underlying growth in Soviet strategic and conventional forces that had taken place by 1973. But nothing in Moscow's behavior during the war indicated that the Soviets' willingness to intervene had changed. The peak of the crisis came around October 19, when Soviet photographic reconnaissance had revealed beyond question the existence of a large Israeli bridgehead on the west bank of the Suez Canal. Using



this intelligence, Kosygin was able to persuade Egyptian President Sadat to agree to a ceasefire. By this point in the conflict, the Syrians had already been knocked out of the war and the Egyptians were now clearly vulnerable to a 1967-type debacle: the rear areas of the Second and Third Armies on the east bank of the canal were vulnerable and the road to Cairo was open. The Soviets, instead of demanding an immediate ceasefire and backing it up with an intervention threat, summoned Henry Kissinger to Moscow and spent the better part of two days negotiating a prior agreement on an armistice. This was then taken to the United Nations, where it was ratified (by the United States, among others) as Resolution 338 on October 22. The following day, after the ceasefire was violated and the Israelis continued their encirclement of the Egyptian Third Army, the U.S. voted for a second U.N. ceasefire resolution, calling for a return to the October 22 lines. The climactic Russian verbal threat and the alert of the remaining four Soviet airborne divisions did not occur until late on October 24 (or early October 25 in the Middle East), at a point where almost all fighting in the Sinai and Golan Heights had died down. The Russians, in other words, waited until they could be all but certain of the likely behavior of their opponents: the Israelis were about to cease firing for good and the Americans had committed themselves to the status quo of October 22 in not one but two ceasefire votes in the U.N. While some ambiguity remained as to whether the Israelis would be compelled to withdraw to their earlier position and release the Third Army, the Soviets knew that the Americans themselves would be susceptible to pressure to make their ally comply.

A synoptic summary of the timing of the threats is given in Table I. There were some changes in Soviet crisis behavior over time, mostly having to do with the verbal content of the threats. The combination of highly vivid imagery and rather imprecise commitment appears to be a matter of Khrushchev's somewhat flamboyant personal style more than anything else. While threats from the three post-Khrushchev cases also contained semantic hedges, they were by and large much more precise. But on the crucial issue of timing, we find a pronounced continuity through all six crises. In each one, the climactic Soviet intervention threat came after the peak of the crisis had passed. The American attitude was the primary determinant of the timing. In four of the six crises (Suez, the June War, the War of Attrition, and the October War), the climactic threat came only after the U.S. had publicly stated its support for a U.N. ceasefire; the Soviet threat then took the form of a demand that the ceasefire be obeyed. In the remaining two cases (Syria and Lebanon), the Soviets received often unofficial signs that the U.S. would not undertake the action proscribed in the threat. In three of the four cases involving actual combat between the local participants (Suez, the June War, and the October War), fighting had mostly ended by the time the Soviets issued their ceasefire ultimata. The conclusion is inescapable that the Russians were deliberately delaying their threats to a point where they could be reasonably sure that their demands would be fulfilled anyway, so that they would not have to carry through on them and intervene. The growth of Soviet strategic forces and local power projection capabilities between 1956 and 1973 did not really affect this pattern of behavior.

TABLE I. SYNOPSIS OF SOVIET INTERVENTION THREATS

<u>Crisis</u>	<u>Date of Onset</u>	<u>Date of Peak</u>	<u>Date of Climactic Threat(s)</u>	<u>Date of Final Reso- lution</u>
Suez, 1956	Oct. 29	Oct. 31	Nov. 5; Nov. 10	Nov. 6
June War, 1967	June 5	Egypt: June 6 Syria: 0300 GMT June 9	Egypt: None Syria: 1400 GMT June 10	Egypt: June 8 Syria: 1700 GMT June 10
War of Attrition, 1970	January	April-May	July 25; July 30	Aug. 7
Syria-Turkey, 1957	August	Sept. 7	Oct. 7; Oct. 23-24	Oct. 29
Lebanon, 1958	July 14	July 15-18	July 19	July 31
October War, 1973	Oct. 6	Oct. 19	Oct. 24	Oct. 25

TABLE I (cont.). SYNOPSIS OF SOVIET INTERVENTION THREATS

<u>Crisis</u>	<u>Nature of Threat</u>	<u>Rhetorical Characteristics</u>	<u>Military Characteristics</u>	<u>Primary Audience</u>	<u>Success or Failure</u>
Suez, 1956	verbal	highly vivid; imprecise	N/A	Arab third parties	Arabs: Highly successful West: Highly unsuccessful
June War, 1967	verbal	not vivid; rather precise	N/A	US & Israel; Arab third parties	Arabs: relatively unsuccessful West: highly successful
War of Attrition, 1970	military	N/A	MiG-21 incursion	US & Israel	Arabs: not successful West: relatively successful
Syria-Turkey, 1957	verbal; military	highly vivid; imprecise	cruiser to Iatakia; troop maneuvers	Arab third parties	Arabs: relatively successful West: relatively unsuccessful
Lebanon, 1958	verbal; military	highly vivid; imprecise	large-scale troop maneuvers	Arab third parties; China	Arabs: relatively successful West: relatively unsuccessful
October War, 1973	verbal; military	not vivid; rather precise	alert of airborne divisions	Egypt; US & Israel	Arabs: highly successful West: highly successful

While all the threats occurred past the peaks of the crises, none came at the very end. That is, the warnings were delivered at a moment when there were still some issues yet to be resolved. For example, the Soviets could not have known for sure that the Israelis weren't about to push on to Damascus at the time of Kosygin's June 10 hot line threat. During the October War, the Israelis maintained their stranglehold on the Egyptian Third Army when Brezhnev sent his ultimatum to Nixon, and did not open a supply column for several days afterwards. But while the Soviets faced some uncertainties, in both cases they knew that the United States itself would be susceptible to pressure to restrain its ally and consequently what the likely outcome would be. Moreover, the seriousness or magnitude of the unresolved issues in 1967 and 1973 were not greater than they were during Suez, when the lateness of the Soviet threats was more generally recognized. Active combat was still taking place between the British and French and the Egyptians in Port Said when Bulganin delivered his November 5 ultimata, and the main sea-borne invasion was not launched until the following day. The Russians could not have had complete certainty either that the ceasefire would take hold or that the British, French, and Israelis would be compelled to withdraw from Egypt as demanded. To have delayed the threats until the end of the crisis, when all issues were definitively resolved, would obviously have undermined their credibility altogether.

Supplementing the purely circumstantial evidence we have been drawing on so far is what is by now a fairly substantial body of direct evidence concerning Soviet intentions, coming mostly from Egyptian sources like Mohammed Haykal and Anwar Sadat. The most detailed

testimony we have concerns the Lebanese crisis, when Nasser flew to Moscow for consultations with Khrushchev and was told that the Soviet Union "was not prepared for a clash with the West, the consequences of which were unforeseeable." Khrushchev flatly refused to accede to Nasser's request for a Soviet guarantee of Iraq in the event it were invaded by Western forces, and suggested the idea of staging troop maneuvers as an intentional bluff.<sup>2</sup> A similar exchange occurred during the Suez crisis. President Quwatly of Syria, who happened to be on a state visit to the Soviet Union at the time of the Anglo-French attack, demanded that the Soviets intervene to save Egypt. According to Haykal, the Defense Minister Marshal Zhukov spread a map of the Middle East on the table and asked

How can we go to the aid of Egypt? Tell me! Are we supposed to send our armies through Turkey, Iran, and then into Syria and Iraq and on into Israel and so eventually attack the British and French forces?!<sup>3</sup>

Such experiences were not confined to the Khrushchev era. In June and July of 1970, at the peak of the War of Attrition, Nasser paid a visit to the Soviet Union in which he asked Brezhnev and Kosygin to extend their existing intervention by Russian pilots and air defense crews to the Canal and perhaps beyond. According to Majid Farid's transcripts of Nasser's talk to the Arab Socialist Union's Higher Executive Committee, the Soviets agreed to supply further equipment to the Egyptians, but refused to permit the extension of the operations of their pilots. The SA-3 crews were allowed to move up toward the Canal only with the greatest reluctance. As a result, Nasser was forced to accept the American ceasefire. When Sadat asked

Nasser upon his return what the results of his visit had been, he replied simply in English, "Hopeless case."<sup>4</sup> While the Soviets did not own up to a bluff in the October War, Haykal and Sadat have both recorded the Soviets' repeated attempts to persuade Egypt to accept an immediate ceasefire in place, beginning in the sixth hour of the war. The Russians, they felt, were trying to force Cairo to abandon its successful efforts to wear down Israeli forces in the interests of a quick end to the conflict.

Since the Russians knew in advance what the outcome of each crisis would most likely be, the primary audience and purpose of the Soviet threats were rather different from the ostensible ones. It was frequently the case that the Soviets hoped to influence the behavior not of the parties to whom the threats were addressed (e.g., the Turks, Israelis, or Americans), but third parties among the larger pool of Third World or Communist bloc nations. This was a necessity increasingly forced on Moscow in the late 50s by the Chinese, whose leadership denounced (albeit indirectly) Soviet faintheartedness in confronting the West. For example, shortly after the Lebanese crisis in 1958, a major editorial in the Chinese Communist Party newspaper stated:

The imperialists like to frighten the nervous with the choice between submission or war. Their agents frequently spread the nonsensical idea that peace can be achieved only by currying favor and compromising with the aggressors. Some soft-hearted advocates of peace even naively believe that in order to relax tension at all costs the enemy must not be provoked.<sup>4a</sup>

This was said in the context of various warnings about imperialist intentions in the Middle East and was clearly meant as criticism of the Soviet failure to oppose the Marine landing in Lebanon. The late Soviet intervention threat can be seen as a means of achieving the substance of detente--i.e., the turning away from a confrontation--while avoiding any appearance of accommodation with the West. This motive was also quite evident in the 1956 and 1957 cases, when the Russians attempted to portray themselves as reliable and disinterested protectors of Arab national sovereignty. In 1967 as well, the Soviets hoped to recoup some of their prestige, badly tarnished by the Israeli victory over Egypt, by issuing warnings on behalf of the Syrians.

In other cases, the Soviets wanted to influence their Western opponents, but for purposes other than compliance with the terms of the threat. For example, Soviet threats during the War of Attrition and the October War were in part designed to improve the bargaining leverage of their client in the negotiations that were to follow the ceasefire, by creating the impression that were the war to resume, the Soviets might participate on the Arab side from the outset. Alternatively, the threat campaigns launched in 1957 and 1958 were intended to promote a great-power conference on the Middle East, in which Moscow hoped to gain recognition as a regional power in order to be able to negotiate the neutralization of the Northern Tier.

The final balance sheet on the success or failure of Soviet intervention threats differs according to the audience in question. With respect to Moscow's Western opponents, it is fair to say that the threats became increasingly successful over time, whereas in the case of Soviet allies and clients, the threats turned into a complete



fiasco. The reaction of Western leaders to Krushchev's missile-rattling during the Suez crisis was one of almost universal disbelief; the lateness of the threats was widely noticed at the time. The same is by and large true for the 1957 and 1958 cases. On the other hand, many U.S. officials were convinced of the seriousness of the Russian warnings in 1967, 1970, and 1973. Dean Rusk, for example, said he assumed that the Soviets would have deployed airborne divisions to Syria in the June War had the U.S. not pressured Israel to cease firing, while President Nixon asserted flatly that the Russians would have intervened in the October War had it not been for the global nuclear alert. These reactions seem to reflect general perceptions of the overall military balance on the part of policymakers, rather than any short-run observations of Soviet behavior. In the 50s the U.S. was extremely confident about its military predominance both in the Middle East and in central strategic forces, whereas by the late 60s the Soviet armament program had already begun to undermine that earlier self-assurance. Since it appears that Soviet intentions were consistent throughout, this would seem to be a case of American officials having scared themselves into excessive caution.

On the other hand, Moscow's success curve moved in precisely the opposite direction in the case of its Arab clients. Khrushchev's Suez threats had an enormous effect in enhancing Soviet prestige and boosting the morale of the Arab nationalist movement. It is quite possible (though difficult to prove) that Soviet behavior during Suez was instrumental in stimulating the later upheavals in Lebanon and Iraq. But Moscow's bluffing could not continue to fool the Arabs forever. Sadat's autobiography provides us with conclusive proof that the

repeated Soviet failure to intervene on Cairo's behalf led directly to Egypt's defection from the Soviet camp between 1972 and 1974. Sadat traces the origin of his disillusionment all the way back to Suez, when he noted that Moscow's missile threats were merely "an attempt to appear as though the Soviet Union has served the situation," whereas it was in fact Eisenhower who procured a ceasefire and withdrawal of foreign troops from Egyptian soil. He concurs in Chou En-lai's judgment that the Russians in effect killed Nasser by forcing him to accept the August 1970 ceasefire. This lesson was repeated again in 1973, when Kissinger's rescue of the Third Army showed once again that America was "the world's greatest power." His subsequent realignment reflected that judgment.

### III. THE REASONS FOR SOVIET CAUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Having observed the Soviets' reluctance to confront American power in the Middle East in purely behavioral terms, the question naturally arises as to why this is so and what this tells us about their larger foreign policy goals and intentions. This is a particularly interesting question in view of the frequent assertion that Soviet adventurism in regions of the Third World like the Middle East will increase with the shift in the global balance of power toward Moscow. The years between the Suez crisis and the October War saw an enormous growth in both Soviet strategic and regional power projection capabilities. In 1956 the Soviet Union possessed a minimum deterrent against Western Europe, a largely coastal navy, and ground forces whose possible deployment was limited to the European continent. By 1973 the Soviet Union had moved to a secure second-strike capability against the United States, deployed a permanent naval squadron in the Mediterranean supplemented by shore-based airpower, and developed highly mobile intervention forces. These changes led many observers to believe that the Soviets were more ready to intervene in 1973 than they had been in 1956. But a comparative analysis of their behavior reveals more continuities than dissimilarities. Why should this be so?

Once again, Haykal gives the best insight into Soviet motivations. In describing the lengthy interchanges between Nasser and Khrushchev during the Lebanese crisis, he reports the Soviet premier as saying:

Now the Baghdad Pact has disappeared at a stroke. Can we imagine a Baghdad Pact without Baghdad? Can we imagine Baghdad ranged against the Baghdad Pact? This consideration alone is enough to give Dulles a nervous breakdown.

I want you to know what Eden told Bulganin and me when we were in London in 1956. Eden said that if he saw a threat to Britain's oil supplies in the Middle East he would fight. He was talking quite seriously, and what has just happened (i.e., the U.S. Marine landing in Lebanon) shows this.<sup>5</sup>

What this highly revealing passage shows is that Khrushchev's decision not to intervene was not based on a technical evaluation of the military balance, but on the political judgement that the West's stake in the Middle East was much greater than that of the Soviet Union. This judgement, in turn, was informed by both long-run and short-run considerations. Over the long-run, Khrushchev recognized and took seriously the West's military and economic interests in the Middle East, as signalled by such devices as the Baghdad Pact and Eden's comments on the importance of oil. Over the short-run, the U.S. show of force in Lebanon had a highly sobering effect on him and demonstrated that the U.S. was still willing to defend those long-run interests. Political willpower and not technical military capabilities was foremost in the Soviet premier's mind.

This profoundly political attitude explains why Soviet behavior was not noticeably different in 1973 than it was in the 50s. The balance of long-run interests still favored the West. While the Soviet stake in the Middle East had increased considerably in the intervening years simply by virtue of tradition and precedent, it remained more a matter of prestige than of vital interest. If anything, Moscow's security concerns had become less critical with the neutralization of the SAC medium bomber bases in the Northern Tier. Influence in the Arab world was politically important as part of Moscow's larger Third World strategy, but in the service of basically expansionist aims which could, in a pinch, be written off altogether. The quality of Moscow's commitments to Egypt

and Syria did not have the same ideological or emotional character as America's relationship to Israel. Finally, the Soviet Union had no appreciable economic interests in the Middle East. By contrast, Western Europe, Japan, and the United States had become far more dependent on Arab oil by 1973 than they had been in 1956, when Eden announced his willingness to fight for Britain's oil supplies. Thus, even if Moscow had held a clear cut advantage in the local balance of forces (which it did not), the United States would still have felt compelled to defend its vital interests.

The fact that the Soviet leadership felt that the shift in the global balance of forces which had taken place up through 1973 was not sufficient to merit an intervention does not mean that they are indifferent to the question of military capabilities, or that there is no force preponderance so favorable as to override questions of relative stakes. Since 1955 the local and global balance of forces has either been overwhelmingly favorable to the United States, or else one of rough parity or slight Soviet advantage. Simply because the Soviet position during the October War was stronger than it had been in 1956 does not mean that Moscow had an attractive military option open to it at the time. This is a particularly important point to note in light of the changes that have taken place in the relative positions of the superpowers in the Middle East since 1973. As the primary locus of conflict has shifted from the Arab-Israeli theater to the Persian Gulf, the power position of Western allies relative to their opponents has declined drastically. Israel and Turkey, the American clients in the six cases considered here, held a substantial margin of advantage over their local antagonists. With the

fall of the Shah of Iran, American allies in the Persian Gulf have been reduced to Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf principalities which are much inferior militarily to Soviet clients like Iraq. Furthermore, American ability to project power into the Persian Gulf is considerably more constrained than in the Eastern Mediterranean, whereas Soviet land, sea, and air access is substantially improved. This comes on top of several more years of rigorous substantially improved force modernization programs in all aspects of Soviet force posture. Moscow might see an opportunity for a military fait accompli in the Gulf for which the United States has no adequate conventional response. The Western stake in Middle East oil may remain undiminished, but no amount of commitment can make up for a total absence of military options.

#### IV. SOVIET INTERVENTION THREATS OUTSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST

The fact that the Soviet leadership has so political a perspective indicates why our present conclusions are not readily transferable to other geographical areas, or even to other parts of the Middle East. Soviet crisis behavior is highly context-dependent. In each of the six cases we have studied, American interests were so heavily involved that there was always a distinct possibility of American intervention, or even escalation to a more serious global level. Such is obviously not always the case. In the three instances where Soviet combat troops have actually intervened directly--Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979--the Russians knew beforehand that there was very little chance of a Western military response. Moscow took distinct risks in each case, in terms of a deterioration in its long-term relations with the West, and in its standing among erstwhile allies and clients. But these were of a completely different order from the risk of confrontation and war with the United States.

With this caveat in mind, we can note similarities in Soviet behavior in other regional contexts. The case that resembles the Middle Eastern ones the most closely was the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1958, which overlapped in time with the Lebanese crisis.<sup>6</sup> The confrontation opened in earnest on August 23, when forces from the People's Republic of China began shelling the Nationalist garrison on Quemoy and Matsu. The PRC leadership was motivated, in part, by a desire to demonstrate its greater militance in confronting American imperialism, and hoped to force a humiliating Nationalist withdrawal from the offshore islands. The United States responded on September 4 by declaring that it might intervene if Quemoy were

invaded, and that such an intervention would involve the use of nuclear weapons against the mainland. At the same time, Dulles announced that the U.S. Navy would escort Nationalist convoys up to the PRC's three-mile territorial limit (Peking having already declared a twelve-mile limit on September 4). The peak of the crisis passed on September 6, when Chou En-lai offered to renew ambassadorial talks and seek a negotiated end to the conflict. While the blockade was not broken until September 21, and a ceasefire did not come about until October 6, it was fairly clear that the Chinese had no intention of escalating the crisis after the 6th of September. Just as in the Middle Eastern cases, the Soviets failed to issue any intervention threats until September 7, i.e., one day after Chou's announcement. Only then did Khrushchev send a letter to Eisenhower in which he stated that an attack on China "is an attack on the Soviet Union," asserting that Moscow would reply in kind to the use of nuclear weapons. Even so, his threat was left rather imprecise by a further suggestion that it was the Chinese people (and not the Soviet Union) who would bear primary responsibility for repulsing an American intervention. As in the case of Suez, a threat to send "volunteers" to China was issued even later, on September 25, when the blockade had already been broken. It was only on October 5, the day before the Chinese announced a unilateral ceasefire, that Khrushchev fully clarified his earlier imprecisions, declaring that "the USSR will come to the help of the CPR if the latter is attacked from without; speaking more concretely; of the United States attacks the CPR."

There are many other instances, primarily from the Khrushchev



era, when the Soviets issued highly vivid but imprecise threats of the sort used in the Middle East. During the ICBM deception campaign that led to the missile gap controversy in the late 50s, Khrushchev made statements such as, "modern military techniques made it possible with submarines and with the help of ballistic rockets to keep all of America's vital centers under fire, to blockade U.S. ports."<sup>7</sup> As in the case of his intervention threats, Khrushchev implied that the Soviet Union could launch a direct nuclear attack on the United States, though in fact he said no more than that it was technologically possible. We now know that Moscow did not possess an intercontinental nuclear capability at the time, and that Khrushchev was deliberately trying to mislead his listeners.

In 1960 a slow-motion crisis occurred in the Caribbean when the Cuban revolution began turning to the left and the possibility of a U.S. intervention to unseat Castro first arose. On May 8 Cuba established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. On July 6 the U.S. retaliated by reducing its sugar quota by 95% in response to Castro's nationalization of American oil refineries on the island, thereby imposing a virtual economic blockade. Three days later Khrushchev made the following statement:

It must not be forgotten that now the United States is not so inaccessably distant from the Soviet Union as in the past. Figuratively speaking, Soviet artillery men, in case of need, can with their missile fire support the Cuban people if the aggressive forces of the Pentagon dare begin intervention against Cuba. And let those in the Pentagon not forget that as recent tests have shown, we have missiles capable of striking accurately in a preset square at a distance of 13,000 km. That is, if you like, a warning to those who would like to settle international issues by force and not by reason.<sup>8</sup>

Again, Khrushchev made no explicit promises to launch a nuclear attack on the United States if it intervened against Cuba; he only said that Moscow could do so if it wished.

But the Cuban example demonstrates the danger of applying the Middle Eastern pattern too readily elsewhere. Khrushchev did not issue his statement after the peak of the crisis. The U.S. made no statement or gesture signalling its lack of intention to invade Cuba; the Russians ran a certain risk of being caught in a bluff. Furthermore, a similar Soviet threat was made at the very peak of the Bay of Pigs crisis, after it was known that an American-sponsored invasion had begun, but before the Soviets learned that President Kennedy had decided not to commit U.S. Marines to support an operation that was quickly becoming a fiasco. On April 18, 1961, later on the same day that the Cuban emigres landed at the Bay of Pigs, Khrushchev sent a letter to Kennedy in which he warned:

I earnestly appeal to you, Mr. President, to call a halt to the aggression against the Republic of Cuba. Military technology and the world political situation are such today that any so-called little war can give rise to a chain reaction in all parts of the globe.

As for the Soviet Union, let there be no misunderstanding of our position: We will give the Cuban people and their government every assistance necessary to repulse the armed attack on Cuba.

Once again, there is a vivid reference to the possibility of escalation coupled to a failure to specify a military response, but the timing of the delivery made it appear more serious. Shortly after receiving the letter, Kennedy decided to call off U.S. participation in the intervention. While other local military considerations were

probably foremost in his mind, Khrushchev's threat probably had an important, if subliminal, effect.

The fact that the climactic threat during the Bay of Pigs crisis came just before the peak does not of course mean that it, unlike the other ones we have studied, was intended seriously. Khrushchev's behavior during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 suggests that, given the prevailing balance of forces at the time, he was ultimately unwilling to go to war on Cuba's behalf. The timing of the 1961 threat may simply have reflected Khrushchev's judgement that Cuba merited the risk of being caught in a forthright bluff. The island was in the traditional American sphere of influence, but for that reason may have appeared all the more important as a potential strategic base. Moreover, Castro's regime had undergone an internal political evolution in the direction of orthodox Marxism-Leninism which made it virtually unique among Moscow's Third World clients and in a class apart from the bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East. The Cuban case stands as a warning that the pattern of behavior exhibited in the Middle East is not one of universal applicability.

In the prolonged Berlin crisis between 1958 and 1962, the Soviets relied both on imprecise language and their ability to control the timing of the crisis in order to manage the level of risk. The Soviet note of November 27, 1958 which opened the crisis demanded that the three Western occupying powers withdraw and make Berlin a "demilitarized free city"; if they did not, the Soviet Union would sign a separate peace treaty with the German Democratic Republic. The note

made no explicit reference to military intervention; this had to be deduced as a consequence of a separate peace agreement with the DDR. However, Khrushchev issued a number of highly vivid threats to use force in the event that the West tried to resist Soviet efforts to conclude a German peace treaty. In a memorable interview with Averell Harriman on June 23, 1959, the Soviet premier said:

Your Generals talk of maintaining your position in Berlin with force. That is a bluff. If you send in tanks, they will burn and make no mistake about it. If you want war, you can have it, and remember it will be your war. Our rockets will fly automatically...And his colleagues echoed like a chorus, automatically.<sup>10</sup>

The ICBM capability claims referred to earlier can also be considered part of the intimidation tactics being applied at the time with regard to Berlin. These threats were given an air of precision insofar as they established a six-month deadline for compliance.

In fact, the Soviets hedged their risks considerably. In the first place, there were quite a number of steps that would have to take place before the possibility of Soviet military action arose, which would give the Russians ample opportunity to back out of their commitment. Secondly, the six-month deadline was less than firm, even when it was initially issued. Khrushchev left it unclear whether he expected the Western allies to comply fully with his demands in the specified time period, or merely to agree to begin negotiations.<sup>11</sup> Finally and most importantly, since the crisis had arisen in the first place at Soviet initiative, Moscow was at all times free to ease the tension. In all six of the Middle Eastern cases and in the Taiwan Straits crisis, the Soviets were forced to respond to developments

which had originated at the initiative of the local actors. The same was not true in Berlin. What happened in practice was that once the allies' refusal to negotiate a revision of the occupation statutes became clear, Khrushchev simply put off the deadline. May 27, 1959 passed without incident, the Soviets moreover being able to argue that the West had actually complied with their demand insofar as they had agreed on negotiations in Geneva. The same cycle was repeated in the second phase of the crisis. On June 27, 1961, Khrushchev announced the end of the year as the new deadline for negotiation of a German peace treaty. The Soviets backed up their verbal threats by the resumption of nuclear testing, the building of the Berlin Wall, and armed confrontations in Berlin. But the Russians remained in control of the crisis throughout, and were able to relax the tension as surely as they wound it up by renouncing the year-end deadline on October 17. The Soviet stake in Central Europe was certainly greater than its stake in the Middle East, but on the other hand, so was the West's. The possibility of general war between the blocs was present from the outset of the Berlin crisis, which forced the Soviets to proceed with extreme caution once they discovered they could not bluff the West out of its position.

Lest we conclude that late threats and imprecise language were simply characteristic of the Khrushchev years, consider the following sequence of events that occurred during the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in the winter of 1979. The PRC offensive began on February 17 with an attack on four Vietnamese border provinces. The first day of

the war the Chinese press agency Hsinhua announced that China did "not want a single inch of Vietnamese territory" and that "after counterattacking the Vietnamese aggressors as they deserve, the Chinese frontier troops will strictly keep to defending the border of their own country." There was at the time speculation that the Soviet Union might take some military reprisals against China in support of its Vietnamese ally. But the official Soviet government statement issued by TASS on the 18th was extremely cautious, concluding that

The heroic Vietnamese people, which has become victim of a fresh aggression, is capable of standing up for itself this time again, the more so since it has reliable friends. The Soviet Union will honour its obligations under the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

The statement was a virtual reassurance that no Soviet intervention was forthcoming in two ways: first, by suggesting that the primary resistance to China would come from the Vietnamese themselves, and second, by limiting Moscow's commitment to that implied by the Friendship Treaty. This treaty, signed some fifteen weeks earlier, contained no obligation to come to Vietnam's defense, but merely to consult over "measures for the preservation of the peace and security of their countries." While the Soviets did begin an airlift of supplies to Vietnam on about February 22, Russian diplomats simultaneously spread quiet assurances that no intervention was likely as long as Chinese goals remained limited. The following day both the defense minister and the chief of staff rebuked China but pointedly failed to specify any military countermeasures.<sup>13</sup>

On March 4 the Chinese reported the capture of Lang Son, a position they would have to secure in order to stage an organized retreat. Two days later, after seventeen days of fighting, the Chinese officially announced that, having achieved their objectives, they were now about to withdraw from Vietnam. This took place over the next few weeks, amid accolades from the Chinese press for the "victoriously returning" army. It was only on March 16, ten days after the Chinese announcement, that Western intelligence sources reported that the Soviets were staging large-scale maneuvers in Mongolia, along their border with China.<sup>14</sup> Then, on the 21st, TASS relayed an article from Sovetskaya Rossiya in which the possibility of sending "volunteers" to Vietnam was raised. It stated:

There is no slackening in the influx of letters from the working people of the Soviet Union to the Sovetskaya Rossiya office and other addresses expressing ardent feelings of fraternal solidarity with the heroic Vietnamese people and disgust at the activities of the Chinese aggressors.

In these letters many working people--workers, students, and also Soviet servicemen--include appeals for permission to go as volunteers to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in order to personally assist Vietnam with weapons in their hands, in rebuffing the continuing Chinese aggression.<sup>15</sup>

One could not ask for a better textbook case of a late Soviet intervention threat. As we have seen, troop maneuvers were used in an identical fashion during the 1957 Syrian-Turkish and 1958 Lebanese crisis, while the Sovetskaya Rossiya article was lifted, mutatis mutandis, from the TASS statement issued on November 10, 1956 at the end of the Suez crisis. While the United States was not involved in the Sino-Vietnamese war, the Soviet leadership

obviously judged the risks of going to war with China to be of the same order as in the other cases we have studied. Consequently, a familiar style of behavior reasserted itself.



## V. PAST AND FUTURE

The conclusions we have drawn from the evidence presented above are relatively self-contained and do not require further elaboration. A few cautionary points are in order, however, concerning their application to situations that may arise in the future.

This study is simply an empirical account of past Soviet behavior, with some analysis of the motivations that lay behind it. Soviet unwillingness to confront the United States in the Middle East, and the pattern of late intervention threats this produced, were dependent on a great many contingent circumstances which may or may not exist in the future. These conclusions are not to be taken as a prescriptive model for the future. One imponderable factor is the generational change that the Soviet leadership will most likely undergo in the next decade. Khrushchev and his successors had firsthand experience of World War II, and the framework within which they operated was one of great caution regarding the possibility of general war. The younger men who will inevitably enter the Politburo will not have shared this experience and may as a consequence be more willing to run the risk of intervention and war.

The single most important variable enforcing caution on the Soviets will be the position of the United States. If the U.S. fails to signal its opposition to the introduction of Soviet forces into the Middle East and thereby relieves Soviet leaders of the risk

of confrontation and war, none of the conclusions presented here will apply. This is amply demonstrated by Soviet behavior in peripheral areas of the Middle East like Ethiopia, South Yemen, and Afghanistan, where the U.S. stake was never strong and where, as a result, the Soviets felt they could act with relative impunity.

American commitment must be established both over the long-term and over the short-term. Over the long-term, legal undertakings to regional allies and clients, when backed by adequate military power, have proven very effective. The Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine have come in for a good deal of retrospective criticism in recent years, much of it well deserved. But as Haykal has shown, these devices were quite successful in convincing Khrushchev that the U.S. would intervene to protect its interests. When coupled with America's overwhelming global and regional military superiority at the same time, they were sufficient to intimidate him out of giving a guarantee to Iraq. The de facto Western stake in Middle Eastern oil is a form of commitment that operates independently of specific political gestures, but even here it is useful to define in advance the kinds of measures the U.S. is willing to take to protect its sources of oil, as Eden did in 1955. Over the short term, these long-term commitments must be reasserted and reinforced as the crisis develops. In the historical cases touched on here, we have seen how Soviet perceptions of overall Western theater dominance were not in themselves sufficient to guarantee cautious behavior in every instance. A number of recent studies have demonstrated that the weak and conciliatory Israeli and American

response to Nasser's opening moves in the crisis leading up to the June War led the Soviets to seriously miscalculate what their ally could get away with.<sup>16</sup> The entire conflict might have been avoided had the U.S. commitment to preserve freedom of passage through the Straits of Tiran been firmly asserted at the outset of the crisis, and backed up by a show of force.

Finally, assuming that the factors affecting Moscow's political calculations remain more or less unchanged and Soviet Middle East policy remains cautious where U.S. interests are heavily involved, it is questionable whether U.S. policymakers ought to exploit this caution by calling the Soviet bluff. The conclusions offered here should not suggest that there is no point at which the Soviets would intervene to protect the interests of their Middle Eastern clients, such that the U.S. and its allies can act with complete impunity. The Israeli deep-penetration bombing of Egypt in January 1970 was, as we have seen, responsible for the provoking development of at least 10,000 Soviet combat troops on Cairo's behalf. In any case, it has frequently been the case that U.S. policymakers have sought to limit their own or their allies' actions for reasons completely independent of the Soviet factor. Self-restraint in the face of serious Soviet intervention threats that arise in the context of a situation generally advantageous to American interests is undoubtedly prudent, even if they are later found to be bluffs. Given the possibility of miscalculation, and the stakes involved, it is very questionable whether marginal gains to be had from testing the limits of Soviet patience are worthwhile.

## FOOTNOTES

1. A great deal has been written recently on the use of the Soviet navy for diplomatic purposes (see especially James McConnell and Bradford Dismukes, eds., Soviet Naval Diplomacy, and Stephen S. Kaplan, ed., Mailed Fist, Velvet Glove: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument), in which the Middle Eastern crises figure as major examples. Besides the 1957 incident, the Fifth Eskadra based in the Mediterranean was surged during the June War, the 1970 Jordanian Crisis, and the October War. While these were politically important developments, they did not constitute intervention threats in the sense used in this study. In all three cases the surge deployments came at the outset of the crisis and were meant to mark a general concern over local developments. None of the subsequent redeployments could be construed as signals of an intent to intervene; most often, they deliberately indicated a "hands-off" attitude toward the crisis. Moreover, for a variety of technical reasons, the Soviet navy could not by itself affect the course of ground battles in the Middle East. Its most useful role is to "neutralize" the U.S. Sixth Fleet and to prevent it from rendering assistance to American allies. This in fact seems to have been the intent behind the three major deployments between 1967 and 1973. It can also serve as a target or tripwire to establish commitment prior to the introduction of other, more effective forces. This was the manner in which the cruiser Zhdanov was used in 1957, and the reason why its deployment to Latakia is the only naval action we are considering as an intervention threat.
- 1a. In the case of the 1958 troop maneuvers direct evidence shows that they were intended as a bluff, whatever their timing. According to Haykal, Khrushchev told Nasser "Please, Mr. President, keep it in your mind that it is nothing more than maneuvers."
2. Haykal has given three accounts of this episode, in a 1965 al-Ahram article, in his 1972 book The Cairo Documents, and most recently in his 1979 The Sphinx and the Commissar.
3. Haykal, Sphinx, p. 71. This story is confirmed in separate interviews by Anthony Nutting and Kennett Love with Nasser.
4. Sadat, In Search of Identity, p. 128. This account is not related in so many words, but can be pieced together from Haykal's Road to Ramadan and from Majid Farid's transcripts of Nasser's conversations with the Higher Executive Committee of the ASU.
- 4a. Quoted in Donald Zagoria, The Sino-Soviet Conflict, p. 203.
5. Haykal, Sphinx, p. 98.
6. Accounts of the Taiwan Straits crisis from which this version is drawn include: Donald Zagoria, The Sino-Soviet Conflict, pp. 206-217, and Alexander George and Richard Smoke, Deterrence in American Foreign Policy, Chap. 12.

7. Myron Rush and Arnold Horelick, Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy, pp. 48-49.
8. Quoted in Herbert Dinerstein, The Making of a Missile Crisis, p. 82.
9. Ibid., p. 130.
10. Hans Speier, Divided Berlin, p. 30.
11. Ibid., p. 11.
12. FBIS SOV, 1/21/79, p. L1.
13. See New York Times, 2/23 and 2/24/79.
14. New York Times, 3/16/79.
15. FBIS SOV, 3/23/79, p. E9.
16. See, for example, William Quandt, Decade of Decisions, Chap. 2, or Nadav Safran, From War to War, Chap. 6.

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